

## **FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** February 12, 2015

**Agenda Item:** Tendoy Bighorn Sheep Season Structure

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 15 minutes

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### **Background**

In December FWP informed Commissioners of the concept of depopulating a struggling population of bighorn sheep to make way for restocking the range. Bighorn sheep of the Tendoy Mountains in hunting district 315 have experienced very low lamb recruitment since the all-age pneumonia die offs of 1993 and 1999, in spite of augmentations in 1997, 2001 and 2012 aimed at speeding up population recovery. A 2012 disease survey identified pathogens endemic in the herd. The Tendoy Mountains herd is therefore a suitable candidate for depopulation and restocking. If the environmental assessment for the project is adopted, and the decision made to go forward with depopulation and restocking approved, an aggressive public hunting harvest could begin this fall. However, there is currently one limited either-sex license offered through the drawing. FWP doesn't want a hunter who draws a coveted license to be in competition with hunters harvesting animals of both sexes and all ages to depopulate the herd. In preparation for a possible depopulation effort, FWP seeks to reduce the limited draw either-sex license quota from one to zero. This way the limited-draw license won't be offered in the 2015 regulations book, which goes to print in February. Additionally, FWP doesn't want to close the season but rather needs it to remain open so that a possible depopulation hunt could still take place. The licenses for a depopulation hunt wouldn't appear in the 2015 regulations book. Such licenses would only be offered when and if the EA is approved, hopefully by mid-summer. Therefore, FWP would like to keep the either-sex License/Permit Type (LPT) in place and change the acceptable range to "unlimited" to facilitate depopulation should that project go forward. FWP estimates that it would take a couple of years of aggressive harvest to achieve depopulation. Once achieved, the season would be closed to make way for restocking sheep. After restocking, and once the population grew to support a harvest, then the season could reopen with a few limited-draw licenses. It should be understood that if no limited-drawing license is offered in 2015, and issues identified in the EA or other circumstance prevent a depopulation season, then there would be no bighorn sheep season in HD 315 this year.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

The local biologist, the R3 wildlife manager and the game management bureau chief have been in contact with some local sportsmen's groups, the Montana Chapter of the Sheep Foundation, and others about the idea of depopulating the Tendoy Mountains herd for later restocking and there has been general support for the idea. Comments were taken at the January meeting and through Jan. 26. Seventeen comments were received: 12 in support, two opposed, and three that spoke to other matters. All comments were forwarded to the Commission.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

If the quota change isn't adopted—and public hunting to depopulate the Tendoy Mountains bighorn sheep herd for subsequent restocking were to take place—conflicts could emerge between the hunter possessing the either-sex limited draw license and other sheep hunters afield.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends that the Commission adopt the quota change in bighorn sheep hunting district 315.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move to adopt the final quota change in bighorn sheep hunting district 315 as presented by FWP.